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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000260

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER LE IS SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM SINIORA SEES PAUSE WHILE PARTIES
RECALIBRATE

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a 2/15 meeting, PM Siniora indicated only slight progress toward resolution of the country's political impasse. On the negative side, the Saudis "have stepped back," the Iranians are being opaque, Amre Moussa does not plan to return to Beirut anytime soon, and Speaker Berri will probably not convene parliament in mid-March. But despite this hiatus in activity, Siniora claimed good news both in the broadly-based turnout at yesterday's "civilized" February 14 rally, and the gradual reduction in pressure from the opposition's dwindling street presence. When informed that moderate advisors to Michel Aoun were extending feelers to re-open substantive discussions, Siniora expressed open skepticism, but directed his closest advisor, Mohamed Chatah, to re-engage with Aounist MP Ibrahim Kanaan. Concerning border issues, PM Siniora acknowledged that the frontier with Syria is a serious problem, but once again urged patience to allow the LAF to carry out its mission and avoid provoking the opposition into new escalation. A request at this time to place UNIFIL or other foreign forces along the border would create serious dissension and instability. Siniora urged the U.S. to understand that he is attempting to wring almost 30 years of Syrian influence out of the system. This is a slow, tedious process, but it is starting to pay off, particularly in Lebanon's security forces. End summary.

¶2. (U) Prime Minister Siniora met the Ambassador, Special Assistant, and visiting NEA/ELA Office Director Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley at the Grand Serail on February 15. Senior advisors to the Prime Minister, Mohamed Chatah and Rola Nouraddine, also attended the meeting. As the Ambassador's motorcade approached the Serail, one could see that the opposition's tattered tent city in Riad Solh Square had not fared well in the previous evening's winter storm, with many tents flattened (and few signs of life anywhere).

PERSPECTIVE ON 2/14 RALLY

¶3. (C) While the Prime Minister was upbeat over the previous day's impressive and peaceful commemoration in Martyr's Square, he indicated the Lebanese had hit a holding pattern concerning resolution of the political impasse. He expressed some annoyance that Arab League SYG Amre Moussa has decided to stay away from Beirut for the time being, but admitted the lack of substantive communication among the

various parties had made it difficult for Moussa to achieve progress on his most recent visit.

¶14. (C) Siniora also indicated the Saudis may have let up somewhat in their diplomatic efforts, perhaps in reaction to apparent indecision in Iran over whether to continue supporting Syria's heavy-handed destabilizing campaign, or to recalibrate their Lebanese strategy toward a negotiated resolution. Despite these developments, Siniora remained cautiously optimistic, primarily because the opposition's plan to topple his government through the street is fraying badly around the edges. Siniora felt Wednesday's pro-government rally demonstrated that the majority of the Lebanese people still support pro-reform measures, but he did concede that March 14th has to show results soon. He implied that March 14th was at a critical juncture: it had weathered a concerted effort by the opposition to drive the government from office. It had also survived serious spikes in political violence, specifically, Pierre Gemayel's assassination, Christian-on-Christian clashes of 1/23, Shia-on-Sunni clashes of 1/25, and finally, the terrorist acts of 2/13 that left 3 dead and 23 injured.

¶15. (C) The Prime Minister averred that it has been a difficult period, but the pro-reform forces had emerged with several important achievements (Paris III, UNSC approval of the Tribunal documents, and the massive, peaceful presence in Martyr's Square on 2/14), while the opposition appears to have run out of some steam. Siniora quickly added he was well aware that the most difficult phase still lay ahead, but it was evident that the embattled Prime Minister took satisfaction in the resilience and survival skills of the GOL and March 14 alliance.

THE TERRIBLE TWOS: BERRI AND AOUN

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¶16. (C) PM Siniora stated that his relations with erratic Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri are as tenuous as always. The recently established four-person committee empowered to discuss possible solutions to the political stalemate continues to meet. He trusts in the abilities of his two representatives, Co-Chairman of the Islamic-Christian Dialogue Committee Mohammed Sammak and Saad Hariri's long-time advisor MP Ghattas Khoury, but acknowledged that dealing with Berri is always difficult. He described Berri as an individual who even as he accepts a position, appears to pull away. Siniora, despite Berri's assertion to the contrary, does not believe the speaker will convene parliament in mid-March. "It creates too many uncertainties for him," he remarked.

¶17. (C) Once parliament is back in session, the pro-reform majority can raise numerous issues that would be difficult for Berri to control, even though Lebanon's constitution and the arcane rules of procedure for that body grant extremely broad latitude to the speaker. In Siniora's estimation, Berri is more likely to keep the legislative body in recess and use "dialogue committees," or intermediaries like Amre Moussa, to deal with the political crisis -- mainly because they allow the pro-Syrian Berri to play various sides off each other. Once parliament opens, Berri will be under tremendous pressure to deal with the tribunal, a topic he wants to avoid despite his vows of support.

¶18. (C) Turning to the ever-challenging General Aoun, the Prime Minister, with noticeable skepticism, listened to the news that several of the more moderate advisors to the General were asking for dialogue and insisting that Michel Aoun's position on the Tribunal was actually closer to the government than to Hizballah. Ambassador Chatah interjected and asked if these advisors were from Aoun's inner circle (presumably Gibran Bassil). When advised they were not, he indicated the message was welcome, but perhaps somewhat

irrelevant.

¶9. (C) Nevertheless, Siniora instructed Chatah to engage once again with MP Kanaan (who was involved in a farcical heated argument over the weekend with an Hariri loyalist, that ended with his bodyguard firing several rounds into the ceiling of a posh ski resort hotel over the heads of collagen-lipped socialites). It was clear Siniora was not expecting much from the invitation, but he also did not want to give currency to the notion that his government was continually rebuffing the Aoun camp. The Prime Minister did agree with the Ambassador that at the very least, Chatah could test the Aounists, who privately say they desire genuine dialogue, while their public statements continue to rip the government as incompetent and not worthy of engagement.

SYRIAN-LEBANESE BORDER

¶10. (C) PM Siniora agreed with the Ambassador's grave assessment that Lebanon's border with Syria was still a critical issue that had to be addressed expeditiously. Siniora acknowledged the LAF was far from perfect, but he maintained that Lebanon's security services were steadily improving. As he has in other discussions, the Prime Minister urged the international community to be patient and allow Lebanon to meet the challenge with its own forces, because in the long run such an approach would greatly strengthen the concept of national sovereignty, which is the greatest political weapon against Syria. It is hard to ask for international help, as such a request would certainly mobilize the opposition and provoke them into action, just as they are starting to lose some steam.

¶11. (C) Similar to a request made last week, Siniora asked if the U.S. could provide his government with releasable proof that illicit shipments were taking place across the Lebanese-Syrian border. He emphasized that this request was not intended to express doubt about U.S. claims, but would rather give him stronger arguments to convince others in Lebanon's difficult consensual system of governance that stronger steps were required.

¶12. (C) In closing, PM Siniora asked the Ambassador whether he had any knowledge of information that seemed to indicate some of the weaponry that was seized by the LAF (in a

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February 8 intercept of a shipment that appeared to be headed for Hizballah forces) may have been of U.S. manufacture. Upon request, he supplied the Ambassador with photographs of the pertinent ammunition cases and asked if the U.S. could make a determination of their actual origin. (Note: Embassy DAO, based upon preliminary consultations with Washington, believes the cases of 120mm mortar shells may actually be of Iranian origin, but has asked the GOL for more detailed information before a final determination is offered. End note.)

COMMENT

¶13. (C) The PM was somewhat subdued during the meeting but not in the black mood we had expected to encounter. Yet some of the people closest to Siniora insist that the PM is suffering from a severe case of the blues. Jumblatt has asked us to help cheer Siniora up (and Jumblatt has driven down from Mukhtara, at considerable risk to himself, to dine with Siniora twice this week, "even though the food at the Serail is practically inedible and he won't serve alcohol"). Mohammed Chatah and Marwan Hamadeh have ascribed Siniora's reportedly downbeat mood to the combination of a variety of factors: sadness around the anniversary of the murder of his long-term friend and mentor Rafiq Hariri, a sense of futility about the never-ending political impasse, the shift of

limelight and action away from the Grand Serail to Saad Hariri's Qoreitem house (with the Berri-Hariri initiative), the complete boycott of him by opposition figures, the bunker mentality of his Grand Serail imprisonment, and -- last but certainly not least -- the shockingly shoddy treatment by the Hariri family of their long-time loyal retainer.

¶14. (C) We can certainly attest to the latter. As an example of Hariri family childishness, someone from Saad's inner circle called the Ambassador to cackle gleefully -- shamelessly, we would say -- that Saad had refused to take Siniora's phone call on 2/14, to teach the PM a lesson. The embattled and threatened PM's alleged misdeed? He did not rush immediately from the Grand Serail to Qoreitem to embrace Saad when the latter returned to Lebanon after a six-week absence (during which time Siniora had to deal with countless challenges). In addition, many sources report that Saad vetoed Siniora's participation in the official rally commemorating Rafiq Hariri's death. Using her widow's grief to sow dissension, Nazeck Hariri has called friends to weep hysterically that Houda Siniora had no right to accompany her husband Fouad to pray at Rafiq Hariri's tomb.

¶15. (C) But even as the Hariri family treats Siniora abysmally and Syria shows its displeasure at his resilience and prominence by ordering its allies not to engage him at all, Siniora remains well-liked and respected by a remarkably diverse cross-confessional spectrum of Lebanese society (minus most of the Shia, of course). No one could have predicted that Lebanon's detested long-term finance minister -- the person who was once destined for eternal infamy for introducing VAT taxes to Lebanon -- would one day have his portrait displayed proudly on buses and posters ferrying people to mass rallies, as happened on 2/14. No doubt adding to apparent Hariri family jealousies, there's even a joke going around town: How does one know Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is actually a deity? He performs miracles, such as making Fouad Siniora popular and Walid Jumblatt pro-American.

FELTMAN